



ABOUT THE LECTIONARY

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Providing a rich, varied and sustaining biblical diet for a congregation is an important responsibility of pastors and worship leaders. Christians are formed and shaped by their ongoing encounter with the Word of God – the Living Word in Jesus Christ and the written Word of scripture. Although the Mennonite Church does not promote the Revised Common Lectionary as the only suitable scripture calendar for worship and preaching, we recognize the importance of this ecumenical calendar and encourage leaders to be aware of lectionary-related resources. For example, worship resources printed on the back of the Mennonite Church Bulletin Series are linked to the Revised Common Lectionary.

A brief but helpful explanation of the structure and purposes of the Revised Common Lectionary (used by Protestants since 1992) can be found in Gail Ramshaw, *A Three-Year Banquet: The Lectionary for the Assembly* (Augsburg Fortress, 2004) and in Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Fortress Press, 1997). Explanatory material for other lectionaries can be found in Horace T. Allen, *A Handbook for the Lectionary* (Geneva Press, 1980) and in William Skudlarek, *The Word in Worship: Preaching in a Liturgical Context* (Abingdon, 1981).

Congregations exploring the lectionary should be aware that more than one lectionary is available to churches. For example, Roman Catholics and Anglicans use a slightly different lectionary than the Revised Common Lectionary. The Uniform Series Sunday School Lessons follow a 6-year Bible reading calendar rather than a typical 3-year calendar. Since lectionary-related sermon helps and worship resources are linked to a variety of lectionaries, it is useful to find out which lectionary is being used.

Introduction to the Lectionary Calendar

An ordered system of selected Bible readings, the lectionary provides four texts for every Sunday over a three-year period. The four readings are drawn respectively from the Old Testament and the Psalms, the Epistles (and Revelation), and the Gospels. The purpose is to provide a witness to the unity of the Old and New Testaments and to proclaim the whole story of salvation. God's plan for redemption is announced and initiated in the Old Testament and reaches its fulfillment in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through the witness of the church, the gospel is proclaimed to all generations.

Calendar of Scripture Readings

Gospel Readings. The reading of the gospel is the high point of Christian worship. Matthew is read in Year A, Mark in Year B, and Luke in Year C. But this arrangement is not rigid: John's Gospel enjoys pride of place during the seasons of Christmas, Lent and Easter. Readings from John's Gospel, Chapter 6, take up five Sundays in Year B, which gets over the problem of Mark being shorter than the other gospels.

Psalms. An appropriate psalm or canticle is chosen for each Sunday. The psalm can be used as a responsive reading and can also be sung as part of the congregation's praise and adoration of God. It can also be used as the central text for worship.

Old Testament Readings. A reading from the Old Testament is included each week. In the *Revised Common Lectionary* (1992), two choices are available for the Old Testament reading during the post-Pentecost season: a text which is closely linked to the gospel reading or semi-continuous reading of the Old Testament. In response to feedback from pastors and church leaders, Mennonite Publishing Network currently uses the Old Testament text more closely connected to the gospel reading in the Church Bulletin Series.

Although many preachers focus on the gospel reading in their weekly preaching, leaders may also choose to preach a series focusing on Old Testament texts or readings from the epistles, especially in the post-Pentecost season. The Old Testament cycles are as follows:

Year A: 25 Sundays of Pentateuch texts, focusing on the major narratives from Genesis, the covenant with Moses, and the establishment of Israel in the Promised Land;

Year B: 14 Sundays of the Davidic narrative (including stories of Samuel and Solomon); 11 Sundays of Wisdom literature (including Proverbs and Job) as well as stories of Ruth and Hannah;

Year C: 25 Sundays of prophetic texts, including the Elijah-Elisha narrative and readings from Isaiah, Jeremiah (6 weeks), Lamentations, Amos, Hosea, Joel, Habakkuk, and Haggai.

Epistle Readings. Because readings from the epistles are arranged in a continuous pattern, they often have little thematic connection with the other two readings. In worship, these readings can be used as part of prayer or as the benediction. They may also be used as central texts for worship planning and preaching.

Readings for Sundays of the Major Seasons

For the Sundays of the major liturgical seasons (Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter), the readings have been chosen with reference to the biblical/theological themes of the feast or season.

Advent. Each gospel reading has a specific theme: the Lord's coming in glory at the end of time (first Sunday), John the Baptist (second and third Sundays), and the events which immediately prepared for the Lord's birth (fourth Sunday). On the third Sunday of Advent, all of the texts include references to joy or rejoicing, thus foreshadowing the good news of the incarnation in the birth of Jesus. The Old Testament readings are prophecies about the Messiah and messianic times, especially those taken from the Book of Isaiah.

Christmas. Christmas season readings are selected from Isaiah, Luke, Matthew and selected epistles. The gospel of the Sunday after Christmas tells of Jesus' childhood; the other readings concern family life. The reading for the second Sunday after Christmas refers to the mystery of incarnation.

Epiphany. The gospel reading for the Feast of Epiphany (which may not fall on Sunday) is the Matthean account of the visit of the magi. The first Sunday after Epiphany focuses on the baptism of Jesus, introducing a brief season of Ordinary Time in which Jesus' earthly ministry and teachings are central. The last Sunday before Lent focuses on Jesus' transfiguration.

Lent. The readings for Lent are arranged to coincide with the preparation of candidates for baptism and the renewal of baptismal vows among all the faithful. Year A focuses on new believers or conversion, Year B on the faithful, and Year C on penitents who are restored to fellowship with Christ and the community of faith. The gospel selection for the first Sunday of Lent each year recounts Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. For Year A the stories concerning Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, and Lazarus are given a pivotal role because of the call to conversion and new life. Year B texts tell the story of salvation history, beginning with Noah's obedience and continuing with Abraham and Sarah's call, the wanderings of the children of Israel in the desert, and the giving of the law. The central text of Year C is the parable of the prodigal father and son, illuminating God's patient, forgiving love and desire for all to be reconciled. In general, Old Testament readings for Lent emphasize the developments of salvation history.

Holy Week texts are derived from the gospel accounts of events which occurred in connection with the Passion of Jesus, as well as Old Testament scriptures prophesying Jesus' suffering and death.

Easter. Until the third Sunday of Easter, the gospel selections recount the appearances of the risen Christ. The readings about the Good Shepherd are assigned to the fourth Sunday of Easter. The gospels of the fifth, sixth and seventh Sundays of Easter are excerpts from the teaching and prayer of Jesus after the last supper. Instead of an Old Testament passage, readings from the Acts of the Apostles are arranged in a three-year cycle of parallel and progressive selections. Thus the life, growth, and witness of the early Church are presented every year.

Pentecost. After a focus on the story of the Holy Spirit being poured out on the church at Pentecost, the Scripture readings for the Sundays after Pentecost (Ordinary Time) pick up where they left off after Epiphany with continuous readings of the gospels and epistles.

Other feasts. Christ the King Sunday is the conclusion of the Christian year (the last Sunday before Advent). The last Sunday after Epiphany (and before Lent) is known as Transfiguration Sunday.

Sources:

"The Structure and Use of the Lectionary," by William Skudlarek, *The Word in Worship: Preaching in a Liturgical Context* (Abingdon, 1981); and *The Revised Common Lectionary: The Consultation on Common Texts* (Abingdon, 1992). Further information can be found on websites such as: www.textweek.com; www.lectionary.org; www.sermonwriter.com; www.esermons.com.